

Perspectives of children aged 4-8 as a source of knowledge

Critical reflection on the development of Kids Expert Clubs as a way to generate knowledge on the perspective of children in the age of 4-8.

Authors: Kitty Jurrius, Adimka Uzozie, Renee Blaisse

Introduction

The needs, experiences and perspectives of children are a source of information within scientific research which is increasingly considered important. Since the almost universal ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Child (1989) involving children in research has been introduced in several countries as part of ensuring their right to be heard. Changing views of children and childhood in relation to their role as citizens was also part of the emergence of the sociology of childhood (Clark, 2010). Roger Hart presented his reflection on child participation within participatory action research, suggesting children could be involved in action research as well. The perspectives of children are increasingly taken into account in policy development and decision making processes. Research with children and young people is crucial. Not only to advance our understanding of how they develop and live their lives, the data can also have a significant impact directly and indirectly on their own lives for example within the education or care system. By incorporating children and young people as active participants, they can provide us unique insights about their lives and perspectives (Hart, 1997; Hermann Gmeiner Academy, 2007).

A lot of research methods have been developed, such as photo-eliciting interviews and map making, to gain insight in the perspectives of children. However, most of these methods aim at children aged eight years or above. Children of this age are able to express their opinions. They can read (simple) questions and assignments and shift away from egocentric thinking (Seifert and Hoffnung, 1997). In the Netherlands, children below eight years old appear to be a blind spot within policy development and decision taking processes. Children of this age stay rather invisible in several arenas of decision making on the national level or at the level of the city they live in. The first concrete steps to actually take the perspectives of young children seriously are taken on an organisational level. Organisations that are directly involved with this age group are looking for practical ways on how they can involve children below the age of 8 when developing policy or making decisions within the school, day care center or neighbourhood.

What does that mean? In literature on participatory child research, research *with* children is distinguished from research *on* children (Clark, 2010). The first category refers to research in which children reflect with a professional researcher on each step that should be taken in research, starting from the questions that should be asked up to the conclusions that can be drawn from the data analysis. The second category refers to research by a professional researcher who designs the research his/herself, using conventional methods. With regard to this younger age group, we acknowledge that there are certain steps within a research study a researcher can take in order to create a safe and meaningful experience for the children involved. Their participation in research should give the children the opportunity to express themselves and their opinion and priorities. This approach is aimed at two goals: to gather knowledge from the child's perspective to use in policy development and decision taking processes (see above); and to empower the child by taken the child seriously and providing him or her the opportunity to influence his or her world.

These are noble goals, but how to put these into practice in the Netherlands for this age group? What does this way of thinking mean with regard to children under 8 years, in

particular children of the age group of 4-8 years old? It is important that we gain insight on how the perspectives of Dutch children from 4-8 years old can be gathered and analyzed, and what methodological and ethical issues should be taken into account when generating knowledge, based on perspectives of children. The aim of this article is to provide insight in how – in a Dutch context – children’s perspectives can be gathered and analysed, and to share what can be learned from a pilot study that puts these ideas into practice.

Methodology

To gain insight into the research question, a pilot study was set up in the Netherlands to develop and test a number of methods of consulting with children. The context for this pilot study was provided by Bernard van Leer Foundation¹.

Main focus areas of this pilot study are reducing violence and improving the physical environment of young children.

In 2010, the concept of the Kids Expert Clubs was developed. This method - aimed at giving children the possibility to reflect on themes like education, physical environment and safety - was based on the current literature on cognitive, social and moral capabilities of children in the age of 4-8 year old (Cole et al. 2008). In order to consult with children regarding their perspectives and priorities in relation to violence and their physical environment several consultations were held. The chosen participation level was consultation, which means that children were consulted on the themes. This is – in terms of the child participation ladder of Hart (1997) - not (yet) the highest possible level of participation, but was chosen to gain knowledge which might be useful to explore next participation levels (like shared decision making and child-led initiatives) later .

The Bernard van Leer Foundation has a long history in the development and support of programs that create significant positive change for children up to the age of eight who are growing up in circumstances of social and economic disadvantage (website Bernard van Leer, 2010). Recently, Bernard van Leer has redefined its goals for the period of 2010 to 2015 to meet the concerns and needs that derive from global challenges and evidence-based practices (Feigelson, 2010). To further shape the content of the priorities of the Bernard van Leer Foundation the consultation process with children was an important part of refining goals in each country and developing strategies. Activities were designed to include the perspectives of children in the Netherlands.

Six groups of children were consulted, three focussed on violence and three focussed on physical environments. In these small pilots, in which the perspectives of children were gathered, knowledge was gained on how children’s voices can be researched in ways that suit their capabilities and preferences. The table below shows an overview of the six different consultations.

Table 1: Consultations of children aged 4 – 8 in Kids Expert Clubs

Consultation	Theme	Number of Children	Methods used
1. Amstelveen	Violence	2	Vignettes / illustrations, conversations, drawing
2. Woerden	Violence	3	Vignettes / illustrations, conversations, drawing
3. Leeuwarden	Violence	6	Vignettes / illustrations, drawing
4. Amsterdam	Physical environment	11	Photography, photo collage
5. Amsterdam	Physical environment	9	Photography, conversations
6. Amsterdam	Physical environment	16	Street interviews

¹ The researchers would like to acknowledge the contribution of the Bernard van Leer Foundation during the development and execution of the pilot study.

As described above, one of the main objectives of the consultations was to gather young children's perspectives on two main areas; (reducing) violence and (improving) physical environments. For each consultation, different research methods were used.

For the selection of the participants, the network of Stichting Alexander has been used. Several after-school services received a letter with information on the background and purpose of the consultation. For all children who participated in the consultations either their parents, or the institution where the consultation was held, gave their consent. The majority of organisations showed great interest in the methods, which were specifically designed to consult children improving policy development or decision taking processes.

Conversations on violence

The first theme that has been researched is (reducing) violence. Different forms of violence, as well as violence in different settings were included. For example, children were asked about their opinions on verbal as well as physical violence. Also violence at school, on television, within the home place and direct environment were discussed. Both children who have had experiences with violence, as well as children who have not been in (direct) contact with violence, were included in the consultations. Different methods were used to gain knowledge about perspectives of children on different forms of violence. These were vignettes, drawing comics, and small-group interviews.

Eight different vignettes were designed, which presented different types of violence. For example, one of the vignettes illustrates a child watching violence on television. A second one shows a child that is verbally teased by another child. A third example illustrates a parent physically abusing a child. These vignettes were mainly used to make it easier to start the (sometimes sensitive) conversation about violence.



Complementary to the vignettes and related questions, the method of drawing was used. The focus of this method was to gain perspectives of children about prevention or reduction, and how to deal with violence when it is already present. Observing and discussing these drawings provided insights on how young children view and experience violent situations and how they think these forms of violence can be reduced, dealt with or solved. These drawings were also used as a starting point for further questions and discussion.

The research locations were selected using theoretical sampling. The backgrounds of the children varied in age (4-6 and 7-8 years old), and actual experience with violence.

Amstelveen

The first consultation on violence was in Amstelveen, with two children of 4 and 6 years old. The consultation took place at their home place to guarantee a safe environment for the children and lasted 1.5 hours. The children and their parents were informed about the

content before the consultation started. After discussing the eight vignettes with the parents beforehand, it was decided to only discuss 5 vignettes as the other three were considered as too confronting. First the vignettes were discussed with the children. After a verbal discussion, the children could demonstrate through drawings how they thought the people illustrated on the vignettes, could best deal with violence they are confronted with. In the beginning of the session, the children were rather reserved. However, after discussing the first two vignettes, and especially during the drawing, the children became more open and talkative.

Woerden

The second consultation was organised in the same way as the first one. Three children aged 7, 8 and 8 joined the session at their homeplace. This session ended after two hours. The children and their parents were informed about the content of the consultation beforehand. Also the methods of vignettes and drawing were used. During this session, the use of vignettes seemed less necessary, since the children already started a conversation about violence before the vignettes were shown. However, the vignettes were still used, in order to guide the discussion and to give the children the possibility to make drawings about how they thought the violence related situations illustrated on the vignettes could best be prevented or solved.

Leeuwarden

The consultation in Leeuwarden involved children who were in direct contact with domestic violence, or are still confronted with violence within their direct environment. The session was organised in cooperation with their care institution, an organisation providing help and therapy for children and adults having suffered from violence in relationships. Six children between ages of 4 to 8 joined the session which lasted for 1.5 hours. Again, both parents and children had given their consent. Because the topic of violence is a rather sensitive subject, especially for these children, the vignettes were discussed beforehand with the professionals of the care institution. Only four vignettes (out of eight) were discussed during the session. During the consultation, it was important to keep in mind that the role of Stichting Alexander was not to help children dealing with their thoughts and experiences, but rather to create a relaxed and safe environment for children to discuss their thoughts and perceptions about 'mild forms' of violence.

During the first half of the session, the four vignettes were discussed. After sharing thoughts about the illustrations, children were divided into groups to make drawings about the different violent situations. Here, the vignette was used as a starting point for a short comic. Through the comic, children could show how the negative situation illustrated on the vignette could be changed into a positive situation. For example, if the vignette showed violence on television, the child could turn off the television.

What do children say about violence?

With regard to the vignettes on violence, most children understand what they see on the pictures and show enthusiasm to share their ideas and experiences during the consultation. Some children indicated that they are familiar with the situation shown on the vignettes. Concerning violence the children state

- *I do not really know what violence is (especially when I am in between 4-6 years old)*

Young children have difficulties to understand what is meant by violence. They were not familiar with the word or had no association with it. After the researchers gave them some examples and have shown them the vignettes, they understood what was being aimed at.

- *Violence is not nice*

The vignettes show grief and anger; children share information about situations where they felt uncomfortable. In their view, violence should be 'dissolved'.

- *Violence can be fun and exciting*

Children aged 7 and 8 indicate that violence on television or computer can also be fun and courageous. To some extent the children seem to be able to distinguish what is wrong or real and what is not.

- *It is my own fault*

Children perceive, not all forms of violence to be wrong. A parent is allowed to be angry if the child shows incorrect behaviour. One of the children says: "Maybe the child deserved punishment and is therefore ignored. The child should apologize."

- *Often I do not know how to act in case of violence*

Most children state that in case of violence, help is needed from a third person, for example a parent, teacher or in exceptional cases the police. When solving violent situations, adults play an important role according to children.

When asking children how they can make a positive contribution to the situation themselves, they present practical solutions as in switching off the television. They seem to have few tools or skills to handle the situation in real-life. At this young age, children still struggle to identify themselves with the behaviour or attitude of others. Some children show imaginary thinking: "Then the fairy comes and creates new friends!"

- *Physical violence is first in line to be solved*

The vignette showing physical violence is considered to be most urgent by the children as the child in the picture is in an unsafe situation. The other vignettes show situations that are more common to the children. They search for solutions in how to handle the situation rather than trying to remove violence.

Physical environment

A second theme that has been discussed during the consultations is a child's physical environment. Although the term physical environment contains a rather broad area, it was decided not to come up with a more specific definition. Part of gaining perspectives of children about these themes, is also learning from their perceptions about what physical environment means for them. Also for these consultations, different methods have been used. Photography has been used as a method to firstly, capture what children actually perceive as their physical environment, and secondly to gain knowledge about their views and experiences regarding their physical environment. We also used the photographs as the basis for further questions and discussion.

A second method used was interviewing. To be able to reach participants in less advantaged areas of Amsterdam, two researchers held interviews outside, near playgrounds and shopping malls. Interviews can be very useful information-gathering tool, because it provides a systematic approach for getting input from young people. Another important aspect is the opportunity for one-to-one interaction. In this way, information can be gathered from a structured starting point, while there is plenty of opportunity to change or guide the conversation while interviewing.

The research locations were selected using theoretical sampling. The backgrounds of the children varied in living area.

Amsterdam 1

The first consultation in Amsterdam was organised in cooperation with an after school service and lasted two hours. Eleven children between the ages of 6 and 8 participated in this consultation about physical environment. The main objective of the consultation was to learn what children actually perceive as their physical environment and how they think about it. Are they happy with the spaces or areas they can play, and which areas can be improved? The first part of the consultation contained a plenary conversation about the term physical environment. What does it mean and which areas does it include? After the plenary part, the children were divided into three groups to further discuss the aspects of three spaces nearby: the after school service itself (building), the playground in front of the building and the walk from their school to the day care centre. Each group discussed one of these areas.

After a short brainstorm led by one of the co workers of Stichting Alexander, each group went to their specific area and took photographs of aspects they liked or disliked; elements that needed improvement; or elements that symbolized or represented the area. In the last part of the session the children were invited to make a photo exhibition including information on the background and purpose of their photographs.

Amsterdam 2

The second consultation regarding physical environment was held at the same after school service in Amsterdam. In this session 9 children in the age of four and five participated. Unlike the first consultation, the children were directly divided into three groups. Each group was consulted on a specific area within the day care centre building or outside at the playground. Photographs were made of both positive and negative aspects. During and after their shootings children were asked to explain why they made the particular picture. Afterwards, they had the possibility to make a drawing on how they would picture their ideal environment.

Amsterdam 3

The final consultation was held in one of the more disadvantaged areas of Amsterdam with less possibilities for children to enter after school service. During this consultation, 16 children between the ages of 5 and 10 were interviewed. The children and their parents were approached in and around playgrounds, and were given a clear explanation on the background and aims of the research and organisations involved. Only those children of whom the care takers gave their consent were included. After the consent was given, the children answered four questions about the play ground and their neighbourhood. Also observations have been made during the consultation.

What do children say about their physical environment?

When consulting the children on their physical environment, photo elicitation and interviewing were used to gather information on children's perspectives. In general most children accept their environment the way it is. Take a look at the following fragment from the interviews for an example:

Researcher: Do you play here often?

Child: Yes, every day.

Researcher: How do you like this place?

Child: I like it, I play here with my friends.

Researcher: I saw that the seesaw doesn't work, what do you think about that?

Child: Yeah, that wasn't like that before. It doesn't matter, we play other games around it now.

In several situations, children showed creativity in the way they use their environment. However, when you ask them about their immediate surroundings the children present several ideas and experiences.

I visit many places

When asking the children what physical environment means to them, they present a variety of places and areas where they like to go or often visit: fair, swimming pool, soccer field, playground, garden, the campsite, the day care centre, school etc. Children seem to be aware of their growing mobility.

Outside I can meet friends

Most children indicate that being outside at the playground is an opportunity for them to meet or make friends within their neighbourhood.

I am not really bothered by defects or shortcomings at the playground

During a photo-elicitation at the nearby playground, the children stated that visible defects at the playground do not really bother them.

I would like to improve my physical situation at home

Children in the South Eastern part of Amsterdam indicated that improvement of their physical environment should take place in their homes. They would like to have elevators that run properly and more space or extra rooms.

My favourite playground would be outside, with dinosaurs and dolphins

When asking the children how their favourite playground would look like, some children mentioned having animals around or dwarfs to assist you. This form of imaginary thinking has been perceived within several consultations.

Six small pilots were prepared and executed. During and after the pilots, researchers discussed a lot of issues to take into account. The evaluation of the pilots led to various insights which ask for further developments and research. The main ingredients of these discussions will be described in the next section.

Discussion

Using Kids Expert Clubs as a 'method' to gain knowledge and create opportunities for child participation is not an entirely new concept. Child researchers in the field know how important it is to take ethical guidelines into account, and which possibilities there are to gain knowledge with and about children (Thomas & O'Kane, 1998, Alderson, 2004, Farrell, 2005). What makes Kids Expert Clubs different is that we searched for ways to use this knowledge for policy development and decision making processes in a Dutch context on an organizational level, and to adapt the concept to the schools and environments involved. For many participating organizations, the Kids Expert Clubs were a first invitation to make child participation for this age group concrete. For the children involved, they often were surprised that these 'serious researchers' were so interested in their opinions. For that reason, it is interesting to take a look at the implications of this project for the combination of child participation and research with (young) children in the future.

As for the knowledge generated, we saw some surprising results. Children have their own perspective on their living environment: they value their playgrounds to play there with friends, regardless of what it looks like. They are not yet able to compare their own living environment with others, for their mobility is limited. This causes that they see the place

where they are as normal. There is though an interesting difference in perspectives of those who have a more wealthy background and those who are located in smaller / poorer houses. These children would like to change their houses. The wealthier children use more fantasy. On violence, it is noticeable that children search for coping strategies, and that they seek to involve adults in working out how to deal with violence. Few children see themselves as capable or active actors.

Although there are some interesting results, coming from analyzing processes through adult perspectives, we also identified limitations of the knowledge. The lack of a different perspective (children tend not to see unsafe situations on their playgrounds, for example) asks for research on other perspectives before policy decisions can be taken.

Another important issue we learned is that it is important to report the results of Kids Expert Clubs. Organizations involved are very interested in what the children said and how they can use this information. By using a standardized form that leaves room for the specific child results like drawings, photographs, and quotes of children (also used by for example the Mosaic approach; Clark, 2010) it is possible to compare knowledge from different Kids Expert Clubs and to publish results. In this project a form was designed containing when, where, who, subject, method, and results.

With regard to the ethical issues that should be taken into account we learned several issues. Obviously, a lot of time was invested in ensuring informed consent. Discussing a theme like violence with children without the involvement of professionals and parents is unethical. Caregivers and children themselves should be well informed about the aims and organisation of the consultation. They are also the ones that have to give their permission for the children to participate in the research and on the way the information will be used.

Besides the protection of the children, this also serves another goal. Caregivers can make an important contribution to the content of the consultation by being a primary source of information on the capacities, experiences and skills of the children involved.

When conducting a consultation, safety of those involved should be guaranteed by the researchers. During the Kids Expert Clubs, the researchers valued the children for their contribution and encouraged them to participate on their own level. Parents or caretakers were around just in case, and the consultations took place at a safe location. It is important to have a venue where the children feel comfortable and safe, but do not get too much distraction as we noticed during a consultation that took place at the home place of the children involved. The presence of their own toys can easily take away the attention of the consultation activity. The activities shouldn't take too long: one to one and a half hour proved to be a period which children liked best.

Besides all these conditions, the meetings should be fun and exciting. Part of the fun is using active language and providing some sweets and drinks. Using games and drawings as methods, valuing the children and providing them with a "Kids Expert Club –certificate" and a small present, makes their – first? – participation experience a joyful one. Why is that important from an educational point of view?

At this point in our evaluation, it is important to consider the Kids Expert



Clubs from an educational point of view. In the various initiatives of child participation, the Kids Expert Clubs will be one of the earliest ones that children of encounter. Child participation initiatives can both provide opportunities to children to influence their lives as well as providing children with opportunities to develop important skills such as formulating and expressing their opinion, listening to each other, to learn about society and democracy (Jurrius, 2010). Initially, our primary aim was to research the possibility to gather knowledge and providing influence. The Kids Expert Clubs revealed however, that it is very important to consider the educational factor as well. Consider the following situation in one of the Kids Expert Clubs:

The Kids Experts are sitting in a circle around a table. The researcher asks: How do you like the playground at the schoolsite? None of the children answers the question. They look at each other. Some of the children move their shoulders up and down. Than one of the children says: I like the tools. Another child says: yes, I like the tools too. And the swing. I like the swing the best. It fells silent again. Researcher asks another child: and how do you like the schoolsite? The child says: I like the tools. (The conversation continues with futher questions). At the end, the researcher thanks the children. One of the children asks: what are you going to do now?

A lot can be said about this fragment. We noticed in the Kids Expert Clubs, that children are influenced by the opinions of others. Also it was clear that the children were sometimes not used to the questions that were asked. They had no clear idea yet, and sometimes it took some time before they came to the formulation of ideas. Important observation was also, that the answer of the first child gave inspiration to the following answers. From an educational point of view, Kids Expert Clubs provided children an opportunity to formulate their opinions and to look at other children on how they formulate their opinions.

Instead of questioning our method (the influence of children on each other could be reduced by using individual methods) we analysed the situation on the benefits it had for the children. Not being used to express their ideas about their own environment, they exchanged ideas with each other and formulated ideas together. Children learned by doing. This shows that influence- and educational goals in youth participation in research at a young age are much related to each other. Researching the perspectives of children means that at the same time, the child involved is learning how to express their opinions and ideas.

This phenomenon appeared more in the groups with very young children. Soon after the first Kids Expert Clubs, we concluded that the age group 4-6 asks for other research methods than the age group of 7 and 8 year olds. The second group knows how to read, and is more used to reflect on issues. The first group needs more time to express and formulate opinions. Also there is a big difference between the capacities of the different children. Nevertheless, they all succeeded during the Kids Expert Clubs to formulate their views.

In a society where it is considered important that children in general may express their opinions and their perspectives should be researched, it is of great value that young children are stimulated to learn these abilities in a safe and fun environment. Children experience that somebody is interested in their opinion and have the possibility to say and formulate what one thinks. They succeed in expressing their perspectives, and these perspectives can be taken into account. We concluded that besides the question 'what knowledge can be gained from researching the perspectives of children?', the question should be raised what children can gain from expressing their opinion in the Kids Expert Clubs.

For future research, we will aim at the following questions: How can the Kids Expert Clubs method serve organisations that wish to take the perspective of children into account? To

answer this question, more themes and more contexts will be researched. The database of Kids Expert Clubs reports will grow, and based on systematic evaluations, a guidebook on how to perform Kids Expert Clubs can be produced. Next important question is 'How can the Kids Expert Clubs serve children in the development of participation and perspective-taking skills?' To answer this question, a theoretical framework of desirable skills development will be constructed, and the Kids Expert Club – method will be adapted to increase developmental possibilities.

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Drs. Kitty Jurrius, Social Cultural scientist at Stichting Alexander, develops and conducts research projects with children in several fields of child care and local child policy. She is guest-lecturer (through secondment) at the University of Amsterdam teaching the course Research Methods and Technique, childhood and children's rights research.

Drs. Adimka Uozie, Educational scientist at Stichting Alexander, works with children and youth in a disadvantaged position and is looking after their interests. She develops participation projects to stimulate children and young people to think of – and execute - voluntary activities. She is coaching the city of Amsterdam in developing child participation (<12) in the community.

Drs. Renee Blaisse, after graduating the Master Children's Rights at the University of Amsterdam, fulfilled a research internship at Stichting Alexander.

Stichting Alexander is a non-profit Dutch national research institute on youth participation that implements projects for those already working with or interested to work with youth participation. Since 1993, Stichting Alexander has been active in the area of participatory youth research and has set up training and coaching programs for young people and professionals that draw on a variety of participatory methods